The Mather Witch Project

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Cotton Mather, in all his piousness, developed a fascination—or, more appropriately, an obsession—with the nearby Salem witch crisis. He used his family's political clout to ensure that William Stoughton, a staunch man of God, was appointed chief justice, a position that involved presiding over a special witchcraft tribunal. Cotton then acted as puppeteer and almost single-handedly heated the crucible that would explode into a small-scale massacre.

Fully capitalizing upon his familial power, Cotton Mather manipulated the Puritan justice system. He issued a formal opinion stating that the use of "spectral evidence" should be permitted in the trials as evidence of witchcraft by the defendant. Afflicted girls submitted spectral evidence by claiming that the accused appeared to them in ghost form and forced them to behave in certain parent-averse and socially deviant ways. Once a witness submitted spectral evidence against a defendant, she (most were women) could in no way redeem herself. It was a simple, attractive option for any troubled, attention-seeking teen: Crying witch got them off the hook, but it also condemned their scapegoats.

In response to Cotton's shenanigans, papa Increase implemented what could be interpreted as the first "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. The president of Harvard didn't want to intervene in that sticky Salem situation. If anything, he supported the jury that would eventually hang 19 innocent people.

However, once a Mather daughter was accused of witchcraft, everything changed. Increase's fire flamed fervently. He wrote countless sermons condemning his son's

very own case for spectral evidence, slowing and eventually stopping Salem’s hunt. In one sermon, Increase famously decreed what would later be known as Blackstone’s Formulation: “It were better that Ten Suspected Witches should escape, than that one Innocent Person should be Condemned."

It is unclear how deep the Mathers’ convictions actually ran. Although the trials nearly claimed his sister as a victim, Cotton never expressed any guilt over the witch hunt. In fact, according to historian George Bancroft, Cotton publicly considered witches "among the poor, and vile, and ragged beggars upon Earth.” It’s safe to assume that he held on to his grudge. Increase, although officially opposed to the trials, was motivated by fatherly instincts, not moral outrage. When Robert Calef wrote a critique of Cotton condemning his involvement with Salem in an attempt to weaken the Mather powerhouse, Increase abandoned his responsibilities as a man, a scholar, and, perhaps most appallingly, Harvard’s leader. He orchestrated a burning of Calef’s defamatory “More Wonders of the Invisible World,” and the smoke of scorched books shrouded Harvard Yard.

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